

PAGANISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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This Honors thesis is intended to explore the background of Christianity and how the native religions it encountered affected and altered it. The history of the early church will be examined, noting significant figures and discussing problems that arose. How the church converted the pagans, whether through persuasion, law, or force, will be discussed. The reader will also see how foreign religions and customs were incorporated into the Christian faith and celebrations, particularly on special holidays. The church was deeply affected by the traditions of long ago and the influence of the Christians' pagan heritage still plays an important role in society today.

Note to the reader: The accepted scholastic form of expressing time is now "B.C.E." and "C.E."

This is to indicate "Before Common Era" and "Common Era." However, as an expression of faith, I have chosen to use the classical "B.C." and "A.D." These terms stand for "Before Christ" and "The Year of Our Lord" (*Anno Domini* in Latin).

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PART I

**A Brief Overview of the History of Christianity and Its Beliefs,
with an Emphasis on the Early Church**



Approximately two thousand years ago, a Jewish child named Yeshua was born in the town of Bethlehem, a land under Roman rule. He lived about thirty years, taught and preached to the people of his day, and supposedly died a common criminal's death for treason. He was never acknowledged in Jewish or Roman records and only had a couple hundred followers at the end of his lifetime. Yet this simple carpenter from Nazareth who is also called Jesus Christ, revered savior of the world and Son of God, is known to people all over the world. How did this small Jewish sect gain such prominence on the world stage? What happened when Christianity encountered other religions? Did conversion involve force, synthesis, or persuasion? Christianity changed civilizations as it spread over the globe, but in doing so, it was forever altered itself by the cultures it sought to convert.

It is important to understand the beliefs of Christianity and what its followers preach, especially the Roman Catholic church. While the church has suffered from ideological schisms in the past, for many centuries the Roman Catholic church was the undisputed Christian authority of the world. The heir to Roman authority and hierarchy, the church fought against the influences of paganism and heresies while spreading its own message of God's power and love.¹ This message included the story of Jesus' life. He was the son of Mary, a virgin, and his surrogate father Joseph, a carpenter. A young Jewish male living in Judea under the Herodian dynasty within Judea, Jesus grew up in Nazareth and began preaching and teaching when he was about thirty years old. According to the Gospels, accounts of his life written after his death, he performed many miracles and eventually claimed to be the Son of God. He was closely watched by the Pharisees and Sadducees, the ruling classes of his day, at first because Jesus taught the common

people about God with an authority claimed by the priestly class itself, later because he claimed to be the Son of God. The Gospels tell of several episodes where Jesus asked the participants involved in a miraculous occurrence to keep what they had seen and heard to themselves, perhaps fearing the religious leaders of Judea would move against him before he could complete what he perceived to be his own mission from God. About three years after he first made himself known to the public at the Jordan River, the Jewish authorities convinced the Roman rulers to execute Jesus as a traitor. According to Christian tradition, Jesus was crucified on a cross to pay for the sins of all humankind and was resurrected three days later. He lived on the earth for another forty days and appeared to some of his followers during that time, then ascended into heaven. One of his last statements on record is known as the Great Commission:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.²

Jesus had gathered a number of followers during the course of his ministry, eleven of whom were his closest students and confidants, known as the apostles. The apostles and other followers of Jesus took his teachings to heart and believed it was their sacred duty to carry out his wishes, including the Great Commission. Peter, James, John, and the others made establishing the Christian church their primary goal in life. All except John are thought to have been killed for their faith, martyrs who would be a shining example to other disciples of future generations.

One of Jesus' most devoted followers became a member of the church after the Lord's

ascension. Paul, formerly known as Saul, was once an ardent persecutor of Christians and made no secret of the fact that he wished to wipe them off the face of the earth. On the road to Damascus to carry out orders from his superiors, Jesus appeared to him in a vision and converted him to the Christian cause. Paul traveled to many distant lands during the remainder of his lifetime, throughout Asia Minor and even to Rome itself. His collection of letters to churches throughout the Roman Empire are regarded as inspired Scripture and serve as spiritual references for issues not addressed in the Gospels.

The next generation of Christians were an influential group of theologians known as the Apostolic Fathers. This term refers to the fact that these church leaders were the disciples of the apostles themselves. Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp from Smyrna, Hermas of Rome, and others are accounted among this group of elders and bishops who helped set up the basic tenets and structure of the Christian faith. Their letters are useful in examining the early history of the church and their interpretations of Jesus' teachings. Some of the ideas presented still hold true in the Christian church today, such as respect for the institution of marriage and valuing wives as more than mere property. They also send out a call for Christians to lead holy and virtuous lives, as well as loving one another as Jesus commanded. Other proposals of these church fathers have been at least partially rejected by Protestant denominations, but still have relevance in the Roman Catholic church. Examples include endorsing a rigid hierarchical structure needed to maintain spiritual discipline, the significance of relics, and placing an emphasis on good works to earn God's favor. There are also traditions that have faded or been transformed over time, including baptism only on one's deathbed and actively seeking martyrdom. While some ideas remain and

others have been rejected, the impact the Apostolic Fathers had on the emerging church and consequent centuries cannot be disputed.³

The Christian church was not readily accepted within the Roman Empire--just the opposite, in fact. Its followers were persecuted for their belief and made scapegoats for society's problems, viewed with suspicion and malice by Roman authorities. After all, members talked about being "soldiers of Christ" and refused to worship the Emperor as all other people under Roman rule were required to do. Previously, Jews had been the only ethnic group excused from worshipping the Emperor due to their heavy resistance to break God's covenant, their numerous and highly organized communities scattered throughout the realm, and their economic impact. The authorities found it easier to allow the wealthy and educated Jews to worship in their own way to maintain order and discipline within the Empire. However, when the formerly Jewish sect of Christianity spread to the Gentiles and appealed to masses of poor and uneducated commoners, the Roman leaders realized they were dealing with a new religious entity and sought to smother it.⁴ Saint Stephen is accounted as the first martyr, stoned to death by Jews when he claimed to see Jesus sitting at God the Father's right hand. Emperor Nero blamed them for a devastating fire that wiped out much of the city of Rome in 64 A.D. The expression "Being thrown to the lions" harkens back to a time when Christian confessors suffered the most painful and deadly punishments Roman authorities could devise. In time, martyrs came to be seen as the ideal Christians, men and women willing to die for their faith just as Jesus had been willing to die for people's sins.

This period in Christian history also produced the first apologists, defenders of the Christian

cause who not only argued with the Roman authorities for leniency, but even attempted to convert them. Quadratus, Aristides, and Justin Martyr are accounted as writers from both the western and eastern churches who protected the Christian faith starting around 250 A.D.⁵ These authors and preachers not only defended the Gospel message to Roman authorities, but also against heretical teachings in their midst. Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism all arose during the second century, prompting the Apostolic Fathers and the apologists to lay out strict guidelines for the beliefs constituting Christianity and to speak out against corrupt forms of the faith. These cults arose from a combination of misunderstanding Scripture, prejudice, and outside influences. Gnosticism was a syncretistic form of Christianity that incorporated native pagan beliefs and Greek philosophy into its teachings. It professed that there were demigods in Heaven known as Aeons, that matter was evil and therefore Jesus could not have been a true man, and that there is no resurrection. Marcion, who was influenced by Gnosticism and started teaching around 140 A.D., believed that the Old Testament deity and the deity Jesus spoke of as being his Father were two completely different entities. Consequently, he believed the Jewish texts were inferior and disregarded much of their content, even omitting Jesus' Jewish heritage from the versions of the Gospel of Luke he and his followers relied on. Montanus was a formerly pagan priest who emphasized "ecstasy" in his congregations, meaning people were possessed by the Holy Spirit, which caused them to speak in tongues and see visions. While this is supported by the Bible, this sect, which was formed in 156 A.D., gave a great deal of power to women, only allowed forgiveness of sins through Montanus and his two priestesses, and taught its followers to lead strict lives apart from the world in preparation for Judgment Day. The church leaders and

apologists fought long and not always with great success against the corrupted versions of Christianity that developed among the formerly heathen populations.

The Christian church finally emerged from immediate danger in 312 A.D. when Emperor Constantine ascended the throne and accepted Christianity himself. Persecution had been slowly receding in the years before that, but it was Constantine's conversion and his Edict of Toleration that assured the Christian church's continued existence. Constantine moved the seat of the Empire from Rome to Byzantium, renamed Constantinople, which would become a haven of relative stability and learning during the barbaric invasions of later years. The first official proclamations against the worship of pagan religions came in 391 and 392 A.D., leading to the last great revolt by the Roman aristocracy and driving the native religions underground.⁶

A few decades after Constantine made it safe for Christians to practice their beliefs freely, one of the church's greatest theologians emerged. Aurelius Augustinus, known primarily as Saint Augustine, was born in 354 A.D. in the North African town of Tagaste and lived until 430. During his lifetime, he would help revolutionize and define the church with his prolific arguments and persuasive rhetoric. *The Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *On the Trinity* were his three major works that contributed greatly to the Roman Catholic church's understanding of the Gospel message. Ironically, this son of Christians rebelled against his heritage when he was younger and admitted to keeping concubines in his company before he was "born again." In the summer of 386, he heard a tale of two military officers who had left the service to pursue monastic living. Ashamed of his own weakness when it came to temptation and wondering how he could be saved, he turned to the Bible and read Romans 13:11-14 at random.

The hour has come for you to wake from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

It is from this point on that Augustine requested instruction for baptism and entered work in the church. He advanced quickly, from presbyter in 389 to assistant bishop of Hippo in 395, then to full bishop only a year later. Always mindful of the holy living Christ called his disciples to, Augustine lived simply in the monastery he had founded. It is here that he wrote on spiritual life, confession of sins, God's power and authority, and the nature of the Holy Trinity. Heavily influenced by Greek and Asian philosophy, especially Neo-Platonism, Augustine's dedication to the church and the truth of the Scriptures is not in question. However, it is important to note that heathen philosophies played a part in defining the theological and ideological structure of the Christian faith.⁷

During the fifth century and onward, the Christian church would face other difficulties. Now known as the Roman Catholic church, bishops and priests struggled to spread the Christian message to resistant peasants and convert invading barbarians. When the invaders did make a conversion, they often chose Arian Christianity, considered a heretical form of the faith by the Roman Catholic church. In the fourth century, a religious scholar named Arius argued that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were secondary figures to God the Father, leading to the first ecumenical

council at Nicea in 325 A.D.⁸ and compelling the church to officially announce the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, inspired by St. Augustine's writings, in 381. Until the Franks converted to the Roman Catholicism church around 500 A.D. under King Clovis, which eventually helped lead to other kingdoms accepting the Roman Catholic church, the native populations and their foreign rulers were often at odds over theological issues.

After 600 A.D., the Roman Catholic church gained a great deal of power and influence within the regions once controlled exclusively by the mighty Roman Empire. Priests and bishops were exempted from being tried in secular courts and were even given the power to overturn the judgments of other leaders in a community. Clear rules were set out for penance in this time period, plus concepts like sanctuary within the church and how monasteries were to be operated were developed.⁹

After the seventh century, the spread of Christianity continued and the Roman Catholic church retained its grip on the religious authority it had claimed for centuries. Eventually, Martin Luther and others would fragment the power of the church with the onset of the Reformation, calling theological issues into question and developing their own interpretations of Scripture. However, it was not until the sixteenth century that the power of the two great churches, eastern and western, were broken. Throughout medieval times, the church served as a moral authority and guardian in an era of strife and ignorance. Sometimes this influence was accepted by a local populace through persuasion, other times through violence. Despite the church's insistence, whether through love or punishment, on the need to reject old ways of living and ancient customs, many still survived and continue even today. Although they are shadows of their former place in

society, often just done for the sake of tradition without any meaning, people still acknowledge their pagan heritage in these acts. This paper will continue to explore how the church triumphed over paganism in its quest to convert Europe, but how it was subtly altered and influenced by the very forces it sought to eradicate. In examining the Christian faith today, one cannot forget the role heathen beliefs played in its development.

PART II

Christmas and Its Celebrations



Christmas is the time in the church calendar designated to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. He was the son of Mary and Joseph, a recently married couple from Nazareth who were traveling to participate in a census ordered by the Roman government. He was born in a stable located in Bethlehem, which was a town of Judea. Important events surrounding his birth are the Annunciation, the season of Advent, and the visit by the Magi. In celebrating this significant and joyful event, Christians all over the world have developed their own ways of remembering the tiny Christ child who would grow up to suffer and die to take away their sins.

The angel Gabriel came to the virgin Mary before she was married to Joseph to tell her that God had chosen her to bear the long looked-for messiah of Jewish lore and tradition. This announcement, from which comes the term *Annunciation*, is the beginning of a great saga that would change the world.

The angel [Gabriel] went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God... For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel

left her.¹⁰

This text from the Gospel of Luke shows the importance the early Christians placed on Jesus' origins. He would grow in the womb and be born like any ordinary man, but he would be conceived by the power of God alone, assuring his divinity as well as his humanity. Joseph would serve as a father figure in Jesus' life, but he was actually a surrogate parent. The stories of his conception and birth would later be of vital importance to church councils who debated about the nature of God and how Christian churches would interpret Scripture.

Although the theological issues are Christian in nature, influences from pagan traditions are clearly evident in the actual celebration of Christmas even today. This is partially due to the fact that the early church fathers probably specifically created the holy feast of Christmas in order to help repress the pagan rites their newly arrived converts still enjoyed and participated in. The commemoration of the winter solstice was an event common to cultures all across the world, with traditions and rituals already hundreds, if not thousands, of years old. Since the Gospels do not specifically mention the date of Jesus' birth, the observance of Christmas was instituted during this season to give the members a chance to do something related to church and keep them from betraying their faith. It is interesting to note that the church severely condemned any partying or lavish displays connected to the birth of Christ when it was first recognized as a church holiday. Tertullian, an early Christian apologist of the second century, wrote,

Let [the heathens] kindle lamps, they who have no light; let them fix on the doorposts laurels which shall afterwards be burnt, they for whom fire is close at hand; meet for them are testimonies of darkness and auguries of punishment. But thou art a light of the world and a tree that is ever

green; if thou hast renounced temples, make not a temple of thy own house-door.

Despite the church's urging and punishment, many people continued to hold celebrations during the Christmas season. The church eventually realized the futility of their endeavors and instead tried to limit the pagan influences and references, even coming to accept many of the works and designs it had rejected before.¹¹ The earliest reference available on when Christmas was officially incorporated into the church year is known as the Philocalian Calendar and is dated 354 A.D., but that document refers to an older text from around 336.¹² Tradition holds that it has been celebrated since 98 A.D. and that Telesphorus, bishop of Rome, ordered believers to observe a solemn feast every year in 137. However, it is not until the time of Julius I, bishop of Rome in the fourth century, that December is clearly marked as the time to remember Christ's birth.¹³ The dates on which it is celebrated vary according to region, the western church observing Jesus' birth on December 25 while the eastern church remembers it on January 6.¹⁴

Ancient winter festivals helped shape the church's view of Christmas, even as it sought to convert the heathen populations. The *Saturnalia* was a festival held in December to honor the Roman god Saturn. Normal business was halted for mass revelries to celebrate the return of the sun and hopes for a plentiful harvest. A mock ruler, called Saturn for the duration of the festivities, was appointed to rule over the party. This in turn led to the tradition of the Lord of Misrule, who presided over celebrations at castles and palaces at Christmastime during the Middle Ages. As with other cultures, houses and temples in the Roman Empire were decorated with green boughs to signify the coming bloom of Spring, another familiar sight in Christian homes.

Trees are stunning visual reminders of the Christmas season in Christian homes. Of course,

this concept appears nowhere in the story of Jesus' birth; its roots are founded on pagan customs. Although the tree familiar to people today is essentially German in terms of origin, it can be traced back even farther than that. Some scholars believe the Christmas tree is a melding of the ancient Roman custom of decorating houses with laurels and green trees during winter celebrations and the Christian superstition that fruit trees blossom every Christmas Eve. In medieval times, it was believed to be a sign of God's power that even in the dead of winter, the day Christ was born would allow trees and flowers to bloom, superseding the rules of nature. After all, the lights on a Christmas tree suggest bright flowers and the ornaments often resemble pieces of fruit. Before trees became the prevalent expression of Christmastime, people would put out poles or "pyramids" made of wood and adorned with colored paper and lights. Tradition holds that it was Martin Luther, father of the Reformation, who erected a tree arrayed with many lights in his home and caused this custom to become widespread in Germany and eventually elsewhere. While originally being an ancient ritual of tree worship, the belief developed that God would bestow His blessings and love on a house with a tree dedicated to Him and the memory of Christ's birth.¹⁵

The presence of light is an important part in Christmas decorating today since it signifies honor to God and invites the Christ child into one's home in the current era. In ages past, light was the embodiment of the sun and its power, indicating the people's hopes that warmer weather and longer days would return along with a bountiful harvest. Persians celebrated the winter solstice with great feasts and bonfires dedicated to their goddess of light Mithra. The Germanic tribes celebrated Yule, which included the tradition of bringing a Yule log from the woods and burning it to symbolize the sun. The Yule log is a tradition still followed in some parts of Europe and

even in the New World, though it has taken on different meanings over time. Nowadays, fireworks, torches, and bonfires are still lit to make this special season more joyful and memorable. Even the church itself has been inspired by the pagans' fascination with fire and light in that many congregations participate in candlelight services on Christmas Eve.¹⁶

Ancient figures, both Christian and pagan, have come to be representations of Christmas alongside Jesus. Santa Claus is a familiar figure in the United States, a transformed figure from Dutch pioneers who brought memories of St. Nicholas with them across the sea. St. Nicholas was originally a Roman Catholic bishop in fourth-century Myra, a city in Asia Minor. His generosity and love of children gradually led to the tradition of his active participation in the Christmas season, in the capacity of handing out sweet things to good children and rods to the naughty ones. He is still revered in Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, and in various parts of Germany during this time of year. People even dress up like him during festivals and hope he will leave gifts in their shoes.¹⁷ Other characters associated with the birth of Jesus who play a role at Christmas are the Wise Men, also known as the Magi and the Three Kings. Though the Bible does not mention how many of these foreigners actually visited the baby Jesus, tradition says there were three of them due to the fact that they brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They have even been given the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, the last being dark-skinned. Some people believe the wise men come on the Twelfth Night of Christmas, riding on horses or camels to bring gifts. Odin, a Teutonic god also called Woden, may have also inspired Christmas figures and the exchange of gifts. During the Yule season in northern parts of Europe, he is said to have wandered among the people in a blue cloak and wide-brimmed hat to mete out rewards and

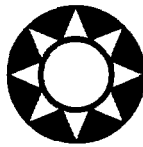
punishments.¹⁸

Animals are regarded in a special manner during the Christmas season, probably because of the fact that animals are mentioned in the Christmas story. It is said a little lamb gave wool for Jesus' blanket while a wren brought moss and feathers to line the manger. A raven flew over the stable and was the first creature to know of the Son of God's arrival while a rooster crowed all night until dawn. People say that when midnight strikes on Christmas Eve, animals are given the power of speech and bees hum the hundredth Psalm. Ordinary animals are given extra fodder or even eat food that the family takes from their dinner table, such as in Poland. Revelers leave out extra food for wild animals, one example being that Scandinavians place a sheaf of grain on a tall pole for birds. In Norway, fishing nets are not deployed and traps are not set. All these traditions have roots in pagan superstitions of luck and blessing, but Christians have added new meanings to them. Just as Christmas is a call for people to love one another and treat each other well, many people around the world see it as a time to show animals special love and care as well.¹⁹

The birth of Jesus would signify great historical changes, but at the time, he was just a tiny newborn in a strange place. His birthday is a cause for joy and jubilation for Christians all around the world, but their methods of celebration are deeply rooted in the ancient past. Christmas trees, bonfires, wandering visitors who bring good luck, and animals who speak reflect the pagan heritage converted Christians rejected in one sense, but treasured in another.

PART III

Easter and Its Traditions



Easter is the celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection three days after his death on the cross. Important days preceding it are the forty days of Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. Lent is a time of preparation and self-denial for many Christians in remembrance of Christ's suffering and saving power. Maundy Thursday marks the day that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus and had him arrested, Good Friday is held in remembrance of his death, while Holy Saturday is a day set aside for contemplation and prayer in expectation of Christ's rising. These holy days all have special emphasis in the Christian church and have particular customs associated with them, but Easter itself is the highest holy day in church calendar, rivaled only by Christmas in terms of its significance and celebration.

Easter is a movable feast in the church's calendar, unlike Christmas. When it should be celebrated was a cause of great debate in the early church: some people thought it should always be held on the Lord's Day while others believed it should retain its historical connection to the Jewish Passover and be observed on the third day after the fourteenth Nisan, according to the lunar calendar. The western church, especially the church in Rome, supported the former view while the eastern church advocated the latter. The Council of Nicea finally decided the matter in 325 A.D. by choosing the western view, so since then the church has observed Easter on the Sunday nearest to the anniversary of Jesus' resurrection. This is calculated by looking for the Paschal moon, the first full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox, so Easter is always commemorated between March 21 and April 25.²⁰

During the Middle Ages, baptism was an important part of the Easter service. It was believed that being washed by the water from the baptismal font signified the old sinful nature being

drowned and the new person in Christ was raised from the dead by His power, so the imagery of the Resurrection was very prevalent at this time. The candidates spent the season of Lent in prayer and study, learning about the church and its beliefs. They went to the baptistry to receive the sacrament, then joined the congregation at Mass in their white robes to greet each other with the salutation "Christ is risen!" at the break of dawn. The Roman Catholic church still confirms its new members on Easter Sunday, as well as maintaining some of the most ancient customs of the church in its midnight service. This service has no introit, creed, or *Agnus Dei* due to the fact that they were introduced later in history. The paschal candle is still lit and the Bible is read, including the twelve prophecies and the Gospels. The Mass ends with the Easter Alleluia that has brought an end to vigil and began joyous celebration each year for centuries.²¹

Due to the fact that Easter revolves around the spring equinox, it shares many traits with Christmas in that Christians usurped a pagan holiday for their own needs. The transition from Winter to Spring inspired symbols of life and death, the rebirth of all living things, at Christmas. The spring equinox was another step in the cycle of time for pagans to rejoice in the life inherent to the blooming of Spring, inspiring festivals and magical charms. In fact, scholars believe the English term "Easter" originally came from the name of a Teutonic goddess of spring, Eostre.²² Christians took the holiday and revised that theme by emphasizing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, many of the ancient symbols were absorbed into the Christian feast and made part of the celebration surrounding Holy Week.

The power of the sun was a prominent motif of the ancients, so light played an important part in the spring festivals. This continued after Christianity incorporated the heathen rituals, but

special importance was placed on how Jesus is “The Light of the World” and how he resides in heaven bright as the sun, described in Revelation 1:14 and elsewhere. Thus, the tradition of burning fires continued after the people of Europe were converted. Saint Patrick started the custom of lighting and blessing bonfires on Holy Saturday in Ireland to encourage people to come to church and reflect on God’s power and love. By the ninth century, this concept had spread all over Europe and was even made a part of the special services. Members of the church doused all fires and lights in their houses before going to Mass, then carried a torch taken from the blessed fire back to their homes. This was believed to be a sign of good luck and allowed people to come together in a festive setting to show their love for God and for one another.

Plant life plays a special part during Easter festivities. Greenery is spread around the home at Christmastime, but flowers predominate at Easter. Easter lilies have a prominent place around the altar on Easter Sunday. These white flowers represent the purity of Christ, augmented by the fact they bloom around this time of year. The bulb is buried and “reborn” as a marvelous work of God’s creation, again marking the theme of death and resurrection. With their blooms in the shape of a trumpet, some liken it to the horns the angels will blow at Christ’s return.

Animals are present in Easter festivities, too. The Easter Bunny is the classic example, hiding eggs for children to find each year. Some scholars believe the bunny may be the incarnation of the hare that always accompanied the ancient German goddess Ostara. Rabbits and hares have been a symbol of fertility in many cultures for millennia and have absolutely no basis in Scripture, so this familiar furry form is a direct descendant of the Christian church’s pagan heritage. The Paschal lamb is also a part of Holy Weekend, marking the Last Supper’s connection with the Jewish

Passover and remembering the innocence and purity of Christ as he sacrificed himself for the sake of the world.

Easter eggs are a favorite tradition of families around the world with an obvious heathen background. Many cultures, beginning with the ancient Egyptians and Hindus, believed the world was formed from a massive egg. Pan Ku was born from an egg, with the shells forming heaven and earth, in Chinese myth. This simple object, which looks like a stone, somehow inexplicably brought forth life in a way that amazed people of long ago. It is the ultimate representation of life and fertility in countless civilizations. For Christians, the egg symbolizes the rock tomb that Jesus conquered in his resurrection. In fact, many Orthodox Christians refrain from eating eggs during the season of Lent, so having the family share one on Easter morning is a custom that continues even today. They are also made into objects of beauty using dye, paint, and other artistic methods. Some are highly prized, the most famous examples being the works of Peter Carl Fabergé. Russians exchange red-colored eggs, in remembrance of the blood Jesus shed, on Easter Sunday. All over the world, children hunt for eggs, often laid by the a mystical bunny of some sort, on Easter.²³

Other days in Holy Week have interesting traditions as well. Just as pagans baked special loaves to worship Eostre and receive her blessing, some Christians believe making hot cross buns with the symbol of a cross on them during Good Friday will bring good luck for the entire year. This custom is especially prevalent in England, where the cakes hang somewhere in the home throughout the year. The island of Bermuda also celebrates Good Friday in a unique way. During the nineteenth century, a teacher was attempting to explain to his students how Jesus

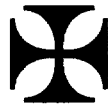
ascended into heaven and cut the string of a flying kite to demonstrate. Since then, flying kites has been a custom observed there every year.²⁴

It is important to note that Jesus is not the only figure in history to experience a resurrection. The cycle of life and death plays an important role in numerous civilizations. There are many stories where a god will die and his mother or spouse will try to rescue him from the underworld. The Sumerians had Tammuz and Ishtar, the Syrians taught about Adonai and Astarte, the Greeks spoke of Adonis and Aphrodite, and the Egyptians told the tale of Osiris and Isis. Each of these stories shows the power of life and love, as well as the constant struggle to overcome death. Indeed, the Roman Catholic reverence for Mary, mother of Jesus, parallels how the pagans felt about the Great Mother Goddesses who strove to save their sons and husbands from certain doom. The story of Jesus Christ is unique in that God lives a human lifetime to save mankind from the torments of hell, but it contains themes that were told for centuries beforehand.²⁵

Holy Week, and especially Easter, is a very special time in the church year, when Christians all over the world remember the sacrifice Jesus Christ made on the cross and how he claimed victory over sin and death with his resurrection. While some of the ways Easter is celebrated hearkens back to a time long before missionaries spread the Gospel message, these traditions do not detract from the Easter experience, but add to it. Lilies, rabbits, and bonfires still have a role to play in celebrating the pinnacle of God's redemptive work in the world.

PART IV

Martyrs, Saints, and Relics



When the church first began to convert the pagan populations of Europe and elsewhere, they found heavy resistance to their message. Even when the church was made safe from persecution by Constantine and was made the official religion of the empire, people were still highly reluctant to give up their heritage and customs, some of which had been practiced for centuries. The heathens were convinced their magical charms and yearly festivals were what brought bountiful harvests, economic stability, and victory in battle. Why should they have anything to do with an unseen God that the Jews worshiped? In preaching to the common masses of the empire, Christian missionaries needed to make connections between the religious themes and issues they encountered in their travels and their own faith.

Christians themselves were reluctant to give up the familiar traditions of their forefathers. They knew God was a loving deity, but the fact remained that they were being persecuted, often mercilessly. However, they believed the words of Scripture when Jesus said,

Blessed are those who are persecuted

because of righteousness,

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.²⁶

These verses encouraged the early believers and convinced them that their suffering was not in vain. Indeed, it was even a way to receive the Lord's blessing and favor! Over time, martyrs became the ultimate Christians, willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of Christ. The desire of

sainthood was a strong desire of the early Christians, perhaps too strong. The Apostolic Fathers encouraged their disciples to face death gladly and to do nothing to prevent it. Ignatius of Rome told his followers to allow him to be sent to the lions, saying he would attack the beasts himself if they left him alone.²⁷

Eventually, the most acclaimed and beloved Christians in the Roman Catholic church were accounted as “saints,” people to be imitated and revered. The Christians proselytized to the common masses by telling them of these wonderful people who had lived for God and now were at His right hand in heaven. For some potential converts, the idea of an unseen God who ruled from above and not from an idol was disconcerting. However, they could identify with a common man or woman who had lived a virtuous life pleasing to the elusive deity. Saints, and especially martyrs, took on the role of bridging the gap between God and humankind. This concept even led to saints taking on specific roles after death, becoming “patron saints” of certain activities or classes of people. Believers on earth prayed to these godly heroes so that the Lord would be inclined to heed them more carefully and grant their wishes.

The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches took this notion even farther over the course of time. The western church became interested in the power of relics and the eastern revered icons. Relics are objects or belongings with close ties to a saint that were believed to not only be blessed, but imbued with mystical powers. Prayers alone were no longer sufficient when asking God for healing; an object blessed by a saint or even a body part from a martyr were necessary to achieve divine intervention. It was not unheard of for people to use a tooth or bone from the body of a dead saint to perform a miraculous cure. Icons are paintings or other two

dimensional artistic work that show some sign of God's presence, such as an ordinary painting of Jesus Christ that inexplicably sheds tears. These objects are prominently displayed in church services and are taken to places where a miracle is needed or desired. Like the pagans had their charms, magic spells, and supplications to the myriad gods in ages past, many Christians throughout history and today believe in the mysterious powers attributed to relics, icons, and prayers to the saints.²⁸

Saint Martin of Tours, bishop from 371 until 397 A.D., was the first universally respected monk in the Roman Catholic church. Before his time, monasteries were viewed with suspicion and their inhabitants were criticized for distancing themselves too much from the larger world. Appearing at the end of the third century in Egypt and Syria, it would take some time for them to be accepted by the western church. In time, their ascetic lifestyle and willingness to devote everything to the study of God came to be admired. Since the monks were especially devoted to the cult of the martyrs, relics garnered even more respect within the early church. Paulinas of Nola and Ambrose of Milan are noted for distributing the relics of martyrs, whether it be with fragments of a person or cloth that had touched his body or tomb, to the common masses during the end of the fourth century and into the fifth.

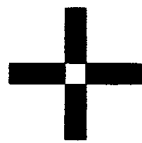
As monks and nuns went out into the countryside to attempt to convert the people, the emphasis on relics and martyrdom gained importance. Martyrs were depicted as the ultimate Christian heroes, warriors of Christ to be admired and adored. If one could not give his life in God's service, then he or she could sacrifice the pleasures of the world and live a daily martyrdom in monasteries and convents. Relics performed miracles as people prayed to the saints to watch

over them and answer their prayers.²⁹ Even today, relics still play an important part in the Roman Catholic church. As Pope John XXIII is considered for sainthood, the fact that a young nun was miraculously cured of a life-threatening ailment after a relic of his was placed on her body plays a crucial role in the process of coming to venerate him as one of God's elite.³⁰

The Roman Empire was flummoxed by these strange worshipers who sacrificed themselves for some invisible God. Formerly, devotion to the empire and paying homage to the Emperor was all that mattered. The early Christians created a new sense of purpose, one in which self-denial and study was prized over gratification and victory in battle. The only battle that the followers of Jesus cared about was a spiritual battle, with its own troops and honored dead. In its attempts to reach out to the somewhat mystified rural population of Europe, the church incorporated their concerns and beliefs. Martyrs were heroes to be emulated, saints became beloved intercessors in heaven, and relics were regarded as the weapons to fight the forces of evil. The pagan traditions of magical charms and stories of people blessed by the gods have not completely disappeared, rather they have been transformed and integrated into the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

PART V

Conclusion



Christianity is a religion based on the life of one man, Jesus Christ. Yet it is a synthesis of cultures and traditions that span thousands of years. The original apostles' Jewish heritage, monks traveling from Egypt, the mass conversion of the Roman Empire after Constantine's acceptance of Christianity, Christmas trees of Germany, and hot cross buns from England have all made their marks on a faith that millions of people share. The saving work of Christ is the emphasis of the Gospels, along with his teachings of hope, faith, and love. How Christians express their beliefs in this message includes their pagan heritage from ages past. There can be no doubt that pagan traditions have played an important part in helping to define the Christian faith and enhanced the way its members worship.

APPENDIX

A More In-Depth Look at the Life of Jesus Christ



For those readers not familiar with the life of Jesus Christ, this section is intended to be a somewhat brief synopsis of his life to better understand his life and his teachings.³¹ Some details from the main paper will be repeated here to reinforce their significance and help the reader understand their context within the story of Jesus' life. If there is a particular aspect of Jesus' life that the reader needs to focus his or her attention on, here is the basic guideline for this section:

- A.) Lineage, birth, and childhood
- B.) Baptism by John the Baptist, calling disciples
- C.) Teachings and important sermons
- D.) Miraculous deeds
- E.) Betrayal, trial, death, resurrection
- F.) Ascension, Pentecost, following the Great Commission

A.) Lineage, birth, and childhood

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the patriarchs of the Jewish nation, ancestors of Jesus. Jacob's twelve sons were the founding fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, but most of them were wiped out or assimilated over the course of history. Only the entire tribe of *Judah* and part of Benjamin survived as a people, which is where the terms "Jew" (the ethnicity) and "Judea" (the modern-day country of Israel) come from. It was long foretold that a messiah would come to the Israelites and deliver them from evil, but they had no idea when or where he would appear. Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised savior and the fulfillment of many prophecies.

Jesus was the son of the virgin Mary, a young woman from Nazareth. She was betrothed to marry Joseph, a carpenter, but an angel came and told her she would give birth to a child conceived by the power of God. Mary and Joseph soon left for the town of Bethlehem to participate in a census ordered by the Roman Empire, which is where Jesus was born. The town was so crowded that there was no room for them in the inn, so they found shelter in a stable, thought to be a cave. Shepherds were told by angels of Jesus' arrival. Wise men from foreign countries beheld a star in the sky that pointed to some miraculous sign, so they traveled to find out what it was and saw Jesus. These wise men had asked King Herod, appointed ruler of Judea by the Roman Emperor, where the king of the Jews was when they arrived in the country, so Mary and Joseph had to take their young son and flee to Egypt.

Not much of Jesus' childhood is known. After the family's return from Egypt, there is only one story in the Gospels about Jesus before his ministry began. When he was twelve years old, he traveled with his parents to Jerusalem to visit the temple for Passover and stayed behind to learn and discuss the Scriptures with the elders of Israel. He appears to have been a precocious student, but there appeared to be nothing miraculous about him until later in his life.

B.) Baptism by John the Baptist, calling disciples

When Jesus reached the age of accountability, thirty years old, he left Nazareth to begin his ministry. His first act was to go to the Jordan River to visit the famous prophet and preacher John the Baptist, his cousin. John recognized him as "The Lamb of God" and baptized him in the river, at which point the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove and God the Father said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

Jesus went out into the desert for forty days and resisted temptations presented by the devil. He returned to civilization and began preparing to spread his message to the Jewish people by selecting followers to heed his teachings and help him complete his work. These disciples, twelve Jewish males, came from all walks of life: fishermen, tax collector, zealot. Peter, James, and John are the most easily recognized, but there were also Thomas, Matthew, Simon, and others. Judas Iscariot was the disciple who would eventually betray Jesus. These twelve, later known as the apostles, would be responsible for preaching to the Jews and Gentiles to spread the message of the Gospels.

C.) Teachings and important sermons

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and Son of Man, emphasizing both his humanity and divinity. He taught that loving God was the most important commandment, loving one another the next greatest. Faith, hope, and love are all necessary to know God and become his child in heaven. Resisting temptation, especially without flaunting one's self-righteousness, was a prominent theme of Jesus' teachings. It can be argued that Jesus changed Western morality since he stressed love, obedience, and humility over logic, temperance, and loyalty. His Sermon on the Mount is one of the most recognized and beloved speeches in history. Above all, he stressed the great divide between mankind and God, saying, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16) and "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Christianity teaches that sin separates people from God and believing in Jesus is the only way to enter heaven.

D.) Miraculous deeds

Jesus performed many miracles throughout his ministry which are recorded in the Gospels. His first known miracle was at the wedding of Cana, where he turned water into wine. He fed thousands of people after blessing a few loaves and a couple fish. People came to him to be healed of terminal illnesses, he gave sight to the blind, and cast demons out to cure madness. He also raised several people from the dead, including Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, and the widow's son. These signs were an important aspect of Jesus' ministry and reinforced his claim to have authority and power from God.

E.) Betrayal, trial, death, and resurrection

After approximately three years of preaching and healing, the ruling Jewish classes grew jealous of the admiration the people had for Jesus, as well as fear that all the commotion he caused wherever he went would draw unwelcome attention from Roman authorities. Therefore, they made a bargain with Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, to betray him. On the day marked Maundy Thursday in the church calendar, Jesus and his followers celebrated the Passover and had their last meal together. Later that night, they went to the Garden of Gethsemane and were betrayed when Judas led the Jewish and Roman authorities there to arrest him. He was charged as a traitor and blasphemer, tried before the Roman magistrate Pontius Pilate, and found guilty. Crucified on a cross on Good Friday, Jesus had told the disciples beforehand that he would rise from the dead. Three days later, on Easter morning, a follower of Jesus named Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found out that his body was gone. She talked to a man nearby and asked him what had happened, not realizing it was Jesus himself. He revealed himself to her

after saying her name, then told her to summon the disciples. The remaining eleven eventually came into contact with him and served as witnesses to his resurrection.

F.) Ascension, Pentecost, following the Great Commission

Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus met his disciples on a mountain in the region of Galilee. He told them that he was ascending into heaven to be with his Father, but that he was sending them out to spread the Gospel message. He promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to guide and teach them, giving them courage and authority to speak the truth about Jesus and the nature of the universe. Before he left them, Jesus said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18b-20)

This is known as the Great Commission, which Christians believe is Jesus' command to proselytize to the people of the world and let them know about him. Jesus then ascended into heaven and the disciples went back to Jerusalem to prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is the day that the Holy Spirit came to the apostles and transformed them forever. Glowing tongues of flame appeared over their heads, causing them to speak in tongues and prophesy. After that day, Jesus' followers went out into the world to spread the Good News. They suffered persecution, torture, and death, but Christians believe they have the keys to heaven and they wanted to share what they believed with everyone else.

ENDNOTES

1. Hillgarth, J.N., ed. Christianity and Paganism, 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, p. 3.
2. Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version, Matthew 28:18b-20.
(All Bible verses quoted within the text are from this edition, unless otherwise specified.)
3. Boer, Harry R. A Short History of the Early Church. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, pp. 29-33.
4. Ibid, pp. 43-48.
5. Ibid, pp. 48-49.
6. Hillgarth, pp. 2-3.
7. Boer, pp. 156-163.
8. Ibid, pp. 114-117.
9. Hillgarth, pp. 2-4, 65-76.
10. Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version, Luke 1:28, 30-32a, 34-35, 37-38.
11. Miles, Clement A. Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance. New York: Dover Publications, 1976, p. 269.
12. Ibid, pp. 20-21.
13. Wernecke, Herbert A. Christmas Customs Around the World. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959, p. 13.
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15. Miles, pp. 265-269.
16. Cooney, Barbara. Christmas. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967, pp. 12-15, 22-24.
17. Ibid, pp. 218-221.
18. Cooney, pp. 13, 29.
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20. Thompson, Sue Ellen, ed. Holiday Symbols. Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1998, p. 106.
21. Cowie, L.W. and John Selwyn Gummer. The Christian Calendar. Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C Merriam Company, 1974, pp. 85-86.
22. France, Dorothy D. Special Days of the Church Year. St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1969, p. 125.
23. Thompson, pp. 107-112.
24. Ibid, p. 149.
25. Watts, Alan W. Easter: Its Story and Meaning. New York: Henry Schuman, 1950, pp. 45-54.
26. Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version, Matthew 5:10-12.
27. Boer, pp. 33-34.
28. Child, Heather and Dorothy Colles. Christian Symbols, Ancient and Modern: A Handbook for Students. London, G. Bell and Sons, 1971, pp. 164-165.
29. Hillgarth, pp. 18-19.
30. Woodward, Kenneth L. "Sainthood for a Pope?" Newsweek, 21 June 1999, p. 65.
31. The following reading is compiled from the four Gospels which Christians use to study the life and times of Jesus. This is only one useful and feasible summary among many that I feel highlights the important parts of Jesus' life. It is important to note that there is a great deal of information left out and that the events listed and unlisted could be interpreted by scholars in various ways. The material is taken from the Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version, specifically the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Any interpretation is my own.

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